

Institutional And Teacher Readiness For Inclusive Education In Schools Of Hithadhoo, Addu, Maldives: A Study Of The Perceptions Of Teachers

Mariyam Shareefa

Abstract: The Inclusive Educational Policy of Maldives (Ministry of Education, 2013), declares that all students should be given equal educational opportunities regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional or other conditions. The aim of this study was to find out what teachers believe, perceive, and feel about their schools' readiness for inclusive education, with regard to the school leadership, school climate, curriculum instructions, individual student support, and teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes. The secondary purpose was to investigate the main challenges that deter inclusivity in the four government schools of Hithadhoo, Addu. A mixed approach with survey and focus group interview methods were used in the study. A total of 153 teachers participated in the survey and 10 teachers were in the focus group sessions. The findings revealed that in general, teachers had a positive view towards all the readiness factors related to inclusive education. However, the results indicated substantial challenges that may impede successful implementation of inclusive education. These challenges include lack of knowledge and skills on inclusive education, lack of facilities, lack of awareness among all stakeholders, curriculum difficulties, and time restrictions.

Index Terms: inclusive education, readiness, leadership, school climate, curriculum instruction, assessment, individual student support, knowledge, skills, teacher attitude, Maldives

1 INTRODUCTION

Advocacy from global community regarding the needs of people with disabilities are increasing. There is growing demand for fundamental policy changes to shift the focus on to the importance of developing inclusive education for all members of the society. Examples of such policy documents are Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion (UN, 2006) and the earlier Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994). These documents advocate for inclusive education at a global level. In Maldives too, a variety of new strategies and initiatives are being introduced recently in the field of education. One of these initiatives is to ensure education for all children, including children with special needs in mainstream schools, a concept known as inclusive education. Inclusive education is commonly associated with the education of children with disabilities or special educational needs in mainstream schools (Cummings, Dyson & Millward, 2003). In practice, inclusive education means the integration of learners who are children with special needs and who are often taught in special classes or schools to be taught in mainstream schools or classes. The guiding principle of inclusive education is that all schools should accommodate all learners regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional or other conditions. As mandated by the Inclusive Education Policy of Maldives (Ministry of Education, 2013) and 'Barabaru School Indicators' (Ministry of Education, 2010), schools have to provide inclusive educational opportunities for all regardless of their differences and needs. In both of these documents, students with disabilities (physical, mental, psychological and various learning disabilities) must get equal access to formal education. Achieving the goals of these policies seems highly challenging as most educators do not have the readiness needed for inclusive practices (Pasha, 2012). To make inclusive education possible, teachers as well as the whole school need to be ready and

fully equipped with all the necessary facilities and strategies. Since the concept of inclusive education is rather new in Maldives, successful implementation of inclusive practices might experience numerous challenges. Schools might not have sufficient teaching-learning resources needed for inclusive practices. Teachers might not be well trained or they might be unaware of the ways and means of delivering meaningful inclusive practices at school level. This study was based on the above concerns, with the purpose of understanding how ready schools in Hithadhoo, Addu are for inclusive education. It is a descriptive study that tried to understand what teachers believe, perceive, and feel about how ready their schools are for inclusive education, with regard to the school leadership, school climate, curriculum instructions, individual student support, and teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards inclusive education. The study also tried to investigate the main obstacles to inclusive practices in these schools.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusion is an approach that looks into how to transform schooling systems in order to remove the barriers that prevent pupils from participating fully in education (UNESCO, 2013). Inclusion is generally believed to mean the extent to which a school or community welcomes children with special needs as full members of the group and values them as regular children (Chireshe, 2011). When addressing provision of inclusive education, one needs to understand the various perspectives related to the concept of special education. According to Alevriadou and Lang (2008), special education can be divided into two major paradigms - psycho-medical paradigm, and sociological paradigm (Alevriadou & Lang, 2008). The psycho-medical model focuses on diagnosis and treatment (Barnes, 2011). In this paradigm, disabilities are seen to ascend from shortfalls within the individual, and the proposed starting point is diagnostic testing for an

individual-based solution (Skidmore, 2004). In contrast to the psycho-medical paradigm, the sociological paradigm shifts the focus from the individual child to the external factors (Naseer, 2012). The social paradigm emerged with the idea that the child is no longer the problem. As a result, people were able to understand that children with disabilities were not at fault, but the society was (Watson, 2012). Alevriadou and Lang (2008) states that in the social paradigm, the social environment plays a crucial role, and the model presents the idea that it is society that disables people, hence disability is considered as a social construct. The new paradigm focused on “the way that social, cultural and environmental structures, practices and barriers, and in particular adult behaviours can exacerbate the problems faced by disabled children” (Watson, 2012, p.1). Hence, the above paradigms have shown an important concept in the delivery of inclusive education. In the UNICEF (2012) manual, school readiness is defined by three interlinked dimensions: a) ready children; b) ready schools; and c) ready families. The ‘ready schools’ dimension focuses on the school environment. It includes practices that: a) foster and support a smooth transition for children to primary school and beyond; and b) promote learning for all children. According to Hay, Smith and Paulsen (2001), teacher readiness implies a period of “ready-ing” a teacher for change. They note that it may be translated as the “state of readiness” of a teacher for inclusive education. Successful implementation of inclusive education involves teachers to have the necessary knowledge, skills, competencies and support to accommodate a wide range of diversity among learners in an inclusive classroom (Mthembu, 2009). School leadership is central in moving closer to a more inclusive society, and in terms of a child’s experience of school life, leadership is crucial and complex (Ruairc, Ottesen, & Precey, 2013). According to Anwer and Sulman (2012), the school principal or the school leader has to ensure the success of an inclusive program with his backing. Billingsley, Mcleskey and Crockett (2014) also argue that school principals have a critical role in making schools an inclusive community that is responsive to the diverse needs of the students. School climate is the holistic context of the life, vigour and quality of the social and physical elements, and supportive practices that cultivate inclusion and safeness within the school (Coulston & Smith, 2013). The school climate needed for inclusive education comprises four elements: successful classroom management, effective instructional techniques, appropriate accommodative practices, and instructional flexibility (Fazal, 2012). The importance of probing and modifying the classroom’s physical and social-emotional environment was pointed out by Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, and Reid (2012). They explained that flexible grouping of students demand environments that allow all students to move freely. In such an environment, materials should be reachable, charts and bulletin boards are at eye-level, and books are in cubbies rather than on high shelves. Fisher, Frey and Thousand (2003) emphasize the importance of interrelating curriculum to students both with and without disabilities. They argue that schools need special educators who can interrelate curriculum and communicate with others by providing instruction and assessment to all students, and facilitating collaborative problem solving when difficulties arise. According to Koga and Hall (2004) adaptations of

curriculum in integrated mainstream classrooms often take place when teachers differentiate instruction. Examples of those adaptations include “providing differentiated activities, homework and evaluations, and using adapted or different instructional materials and activities for individual students” (p. 6). Koga and Hall argue that adaptation of curriculum should be practised when teachers determine that a particular student has the capability to learn the same content knowledge as other students if a slight alteration is made to modify conceptual difficulty. Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students, and the ‘achievement’ is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum (Ainscow, 2004). Students with disabilities currently drop out at higher rates than non-disabled students, because of the high stakes on test performance which serve to encourage more students with disabilities to drop out instead of ‘motivating’ them to achieve’ (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). Reiser (2008) argues that the assessment of students’ learning should be continuous, flexible and formative. The primary goal of formative assessment is “providing feedback to students and teachers about the targets for learning, where students are in relation to those targets, and what can be done to fill in the gaps” (Andrade, 2010, p. 1). Individual student support is also essential for successful implementation of inclusive educational practices (Pasha, 2012). It can be understood that by definition, children with special needs require support. Students with special needs benefit more if the teaching is directed to their particular needs (UNESCO, 2001). The school leaders should encourage positive attitudes toward inclusion by encouraging the development of support groups within the school for other students or parents (Pivik, Mccomas, & Laflamme, 2002). Providing individual student support includes additional teaching and care supports, visiting teacher service, early intervention, assistive technology, special transport scheme, specialist equipment, school building adaptations, enhanced levels of capitation grants, and extended school year schemes (NCSE, 2013). According to Barco (2007), teacher attitude plays a vital role in the success of any program in education, especially the practice of inclusion. Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs toward inclusive practices impact school learning environments and equal learning opportunities for students with various needs. Kern (2006) states that, “teachers who are ill-prepared or uncomfortable with the concept of inclusion may pass that discontent onto the students, which in turn can undermine the confidence and success of those students” (p. 3). On the other hand, Kern affirms that teachers who support and have faith in the concept of inclusion can provide special education students with confidence and a comfortable learning environment. Upgrading the skills and knowledge of teachers and principals will require not only addressing outdated content but also implementing innovative enhancements to the way teacher education is delivered (Smith & Tyler, 2011). Fundamental knowledge and skills needed for teachers of Special Educational Needs (SEN) students include understanding needs and abilities of children with special needs and pedagogic skills such as instructional accommodation and activity differentiation (Nguyet & Ha, 2010). Teachers are required to have knowledge regarding the methods for development and implementation of individualized education programs and possess the skills

for collaborating with other stakeholders (Sucuoğlu, Bakkaloğlu, Karasu, Demir, & Akalın, 2013). Moreover, if teachers lack the knowledge and experience regarding the exceptional learners in their mainstream classes, it affects their attitudes too (Naicker, 2008).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It tried to generate an overview of the result from a larger sample while getting an in-depth understanding through a detailed study of specific cases. Hence, the methods used were survey and a focus group interviews. Data collection from the survey was followed with focus group interviews.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population of the study was all the primary and secondary level teachers working in the schools of Hithadhoo, Addu Atoll. The teacher population of the four schools selected for the study is 273, and in order to produce statistically valid results, the study used a sample size of 160 teachers for the survey, and 10 teachers for the focus group interviews. Participants for the survey were selected on a random basis, and the members of the focus group interview were selected using purposive sampling.

3.3 Research Instrument

For the purpose of empirical investigation of the variables of the study, two specific types of questionnaires were used: one for the survey and one for the focus group interview. The instrument used for the survey was developed with a set of questions adapted from Quality Indicators for Effective Inclusive Education Guidebook by New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education (NJCIE, 2013), and Scale of Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusive Classrooms (STATIC) developed by Cochran (1998). For focus group interview, a self-made semi-structured interview questionnaire was used.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

The NJCIE survey indicators used in this study was developed by group of experts who state that the quality indicators were identified through an extensive review of research literature and examination of similar documents developed by eight US states. STATIC survey has a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .89 and item-to-total correlations range from .26 to .70 with a mean of .51, standard deviation of .11, and a standard error of measurement of ± 0.04 (Cochran, 1998).

3.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data obtained from the survey. The survey instrument was analyzed based on the frequency distribution of responses to each question given in the questionnaire. The data of the focus group interviews were analyzed qualitatively. Content analysis (using the process of coding and categorizing) was used to examine the transcriptions of data from the focus group interviews.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' overall perceptions are presented in the following paragraphs. The school-readiness related factors are presented separately.

4.1 Leadership

Majority of teachers who participated in this study view leadership of their schools mostly positive towards inclusive education. According to the findings of the study 60% of teachers of the survey perceive their school principals as proactive, committed and visible in the effort of implementing inclusive education. In addition to the above, the survey findings reveal that more than 80% of teachers believe that inclusion is stressed in the schools' vision and mission statements. Literature shows that the schools' mission and vision statements must mirror the effort of inclusivity within the schools for successful implementation of inclusive education. After an empirical study, Mthembu (2009) reiterated that as instructional leaders, school principals have to have clear school missions to foster inclusive education in their schools. Thus, schools chosen for this study have appropriate leadership for inclusive education in this respect. Billingsley, McLeskey and Crockett (2014) explained that in an inclusive school, principal has to ensure that all members of the school community welcome and value students with special needs. Also everyone should be encouraged to collaborate and share their expertise so that those students get opportunities to achieve improved outcomes in school and post school life. This study has shown that majority of teachers believed that their school leader involves all stakeholders to make inclusion work in their schools. Therefore, Hithadhoo schools' leadership readiness can be considered high in this regard as well. In this study, 50% of teachers believe their school leader ensures that Individual Educational Plans (IEP) are set by teachers for SEN students in their mainstream classes and encourage them to review and implement the IEPs regularly. Similarly, 50.3% of the survey participants do not agree that teachers are evaluated by their leaders on assessing whether they are using ongoing formative assessments to identify and cater for students with special needs. The qualitative data also indicate that teachers desire to get higher levels of pedagogical support for them in inclusive education.

4.2 School climate

The majority of the teachers participated in this study agree that their schools are socially and emotionally safe for students with special needs. More than 60% of the participants note that the school climate is ready in terms of promoting diversity, having positive relationships among all students, demonstrating a school-wide effort to promote awareness, and have an understanding of disabilities and the special needs. Similar outcomes were highlighted in an empirical study done by Barnes (2011) indicating such elements of the school culture can create environments where inclusion grows and flourishes. Approximately, 73% of teachers participated in the study admit that there is a school-wide approach to building positive relationships among all students (including special needs students) across all activities (academic and non-academic) and all settings.

Coulston and Smith (2013) argue that it is equally important for a school to ensure that inclusion happens on all levels of interaction-between students, between adults, and between students and adults. Nonetheless, the findings of this study reveal that, with regard to physical aspects and facilities, schools need to improve a lot if inclusivity is to be observed in the schools. Teachers of the focus group explicated that all the four respective schools do not have wheelchair accessibility and the infrastructure of the schools are not developed to accommodate and cater students with disabilities. Broderick, Mehta-Parekh and Reid (2012) argue that to develop inclusivity, schools need to establish environments that allow all students to move freely.

4.3 Curriculum instruction and assessment

Participants of this study view that majority of teachers do modify curricular goals and classroom instruction to adapt to the needs of students with special needs. Some 74% of the participants of the survey conceded that teachers incorporate visual, tactile and kinesthetic materials and activities to meet a variety of learners' needs. These teachers also noted that teachers use class-wide routines and procedures to support classroom management and learning of all students. The "Commonwealth Guide to Implementing Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities", advocates that there should be a flexible and innovative national curriculum and, school system must develop means of making the curriculum materials accessible to all students with special needs (Rieser, 2008). Similarly, Fisher, Frey and Thousand (2003) report that schools need special educators who can interrelate curriculum and communicate with others by providing instruction and assessment to all students. Additionally, even though that majority of teachers of this study agree that curriculum modification and adaptation happen in their schools, there is a long way to go before achieving success in establishing a complete inclusive setting. For instance, the survey findings indicate that though majority shows agreement, a relatively less number of teachers agrees that students with special needs receive a modified curriculum. The findings indicate that teachers (55% of them) modify curricular goals and classroom instructions to adapt them to the needs of special needs students. It is understandable that adaptations usually require teacher effort and time (Koga & Hall, 2004). However, Fisher et al., (2003) argue that it is the responsibility of the inclusive educator to create and provide accommodations that cater for the unique learning needs of all students. Besides, these researchers state that "successful special educators have an extensive knowledge base of curriculum accommodations and modifications on which to draw and are creative in using specific adaptations with students" (p. 46). A similar perception is supported by Villa, Thousand, Nevin, and Liston (2005). On assessment, 75% of the survey participants stated that they measure students' understanding using a variety of ongoing (formative) assessments that are different from traditional assessments. However, the focus group interview revealed that assessment of students' learning is done in similar ways as with regular students.

As reported by the participants of the interview, they give the same test papers to all students, and the results are also reported using similar strategies. Allbritten, Mainzer, and Ziegler (2004) reported that students with disabilities to be tested at the grade level of their age mates is not necessarily appropriate as grade-level testing does not accurately reflect student progress and achievement of all students. Their recommendation was to use a pre-test (which is testing before implementing SEN materials) to post-test (which involve testing after implementing SEN materials) method to measure the progress of SEN students.

4.4 Individual student support

Majority of the teachers participated in the survey noted that individual support is lent to SEN students in their respective classes. Teachers who participated in the focus group interviews confirmed that the support is given to those who are in need. This resonates with the argument made by Mthembu (2009) that individual support given to students is a key factor in moving towards inclusion. Data from the survey revealed that more than 70% of teachers agree to use a variety of technology to ensure meaningful participation of all students in instructional activities. According to Broderick et al. (2012), collaboration inside the general education classroom can become an important medium for differentiation and support. Broderick and his team argued that teachers along with those who support them in the classroom need to collaborate with other stakeholders to ensure that all students are truly integrated, valued, and become effective members of the classroom community. However, comparatively a smaller fraction of teachers (44%) agree that their school management members and teachers have knowledge of writing IEPs for students with special needs. More than half of the teachers (53%) do not agree that the school management members and teachers are knowledgeable about types of disabilities and theories of inclusive education. Thus, school leadership needs to increase their efforts in providing pedagogical support for teachers, especially on writing and evaluating IEPs. It can be understood that if teachers do not have a proper understanding on planning an individualized instruction task, they cannot give their full support to individuals. Pasha (2012) who did an empirical study to understand the readiness of urban primary schools for inclusive education in Pakistan is in agreement with the findings above. Literature confirms that knowledge about substantial concepts like students' IEP and types of disabilities are crucial for educators working in the field of inclusive education. Fisher et al., (2003), report that understanding of the IEP and a comprehension of the curriculum and its standards are among essential knowledge which is necessary for successful implementation of inclusive education.

4.5 Teacher attitude

Given that regular teachers are the most important service providers in teaching students with special needs in the inclusive classroom, their attitude towards inclusion is a contributing factor to its success or failure (Kern, 2006). Barco (2007) concluded that the teachers' attitudes and

Beliefs toward inclusive practices impact school learning environments and equal learning opportunities for students with various needs. Pasha (2012) also argues that teachers with a positive approach towards meeting the needs of a variety of learners is an encouraging indicator for inclusive education. Thus, research outcomes are in agreement on the importance of teacher attitude for successful inclusive programmes. The results of this study show that teachers of the schools selected for the study hold relatively positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Results indicate that, 85% of teachers believe that all efforts should be made to educate students who have special needs in regular classrooms. Furthermore, nearly the same number of teachers agreed that they are willing to make the changes required in their classroom setting to help integrate students with special needs. Likewise, these teachers are also willing to help other teachers with issues which may arise when students with special needs are in their classrooms. These findings are consistent with many research studies carried out to identify teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education (Ali, Mustapha & Jelas, 2006; Anwer & Sulman, 2012; Fazal, 2012; Kern, 2006; Khan, 2011). Despite the above confirmatory statements from teachers, there are certain points that need to be highlighted from the findings of the study. One of the statements on the survey questionnaire was to explain their views about the support received from their school management when faced with challenges presented by students with various disabilities. Only half of the participants show agreement that enough support is provided to teachers. Walker (2012) reported that the school principal's support in the form of emotional, instrumental, and informational support, and professional development had a positive impact on teachers' attitudes toward including students with special needs.

4.6 Knowledge and skills

Mthembu (2009) advocates that successful implementation of inclusive education requires educators to have the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to accommodate a wide range of diversity among learners in an inclusive classroom. If the level of the teachers' competency is increased, then the inclusive education programme could be successfully implemented (Ali, Mustapha & Jelas, 2006). The findings of the study show that only 35% of teachers agree that student IEP goals are addressed in academic and non-academic activities in their respective schools. This is consistent with the findings of Geldenhuys and Pieterse (2005) done in South Africa regarding the provision of inclusive education. The results show that majority of the teachers have not been adequately trained to teach children with disabilities. All the participants have general teaching qualifications from Certificate level to Masters level, but only 30% of them have received training on special education. Out of these SEN trained teachers, almost all of them have had only short term professional development training. This finding is in disagreement with Kapinga (2014), who stresses the importance of trainings by stating that, "the success of inclusive education rests on quality teacher preparation gearing towards inclusive education. How teachers are prepared is intrinsically linked to the quality of education provided in the schools" (p.2).

Even though teachers said that they were not adequately trained to teach children with disabilities, they confirm that to some extent they have knowledge and skills needed to teach a SEN student. This outcome shows that despite the lack of proper training on inclusive education, teachers' self-efficacy regarding provision of inclusive education is high. However, more training is needed to upgrade their knowledge of SEN children and inclusive practices to enhance the learning experiences of these children.

4.7 Challenges for inclusive education

Dealing with individual differences or diversity in the classroom can be full of challenges. Literature demonstrates that all teachers experience difficulties at different levels when trying to implement inclusive education (Spies, 2013). According to Khan (2011), there are five types of challenges faced by developing countries in implementing inclusive education. They include a lack of relevant research information, inadequate support services, lack of appropriate facilities and materials, inadequate training programs and ineffective policies and legislation. The findings of this study also revealed some of the remarkable challenges and complexities teachers face when attempting to implement inclusive practices in the schools selected for the study. These include five different types of major challenges that are considered as grave barriers for successful inclusivity. These five major challenges are:

Teachers lacking knowledge and skills
Lack of facilities in schools
Lack of awareness among all stakeholders
Curriculum difficulties and
Time limitations.

As shown from the study, the most significant barrier for teachers is lack of knowledge and skills. Teachers reiterated that they lack knowledge about various disability types, ways of helping the students and parents, catering their needs and in delivering effective lessons. Teachers also expressed that they lack necessary skills on various issues such as managing SEN students together with regular students, conducting effective differentiated lessons for them, managing the time effectively, and giving exposure to a wide variety of challenging activities. "Teachers' awareness is most important. If they lack knowledge they cannot treat them fairly. So teachers' knowledge and skills is the biggest challenge", stated a participant of the focus group. Another participant delineated, "we teachers do not know how to cater for the needs of those students. And ultimately we label them as very weak students". The report published by European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011, p. 4), states that "teachers need a repertoire of skills, expertise, knowledge, pedagogical approaches, adequate teaching methods and materials and time if they are to address diversity effectively within their classrooms". Furthermore, after an empirical study to investigate the preparedness of educators for inclusive education, Naicker (2008) reported that the teachers' lack of knowledge, skills and experience of exceptional learners and mainstreaming has an impact on classroom teachers' attitudes. Thus, the researcher recommended educators to provide in-depth

knowledge of the philosophy of inclusion and the need for teachers to develop the commitment required to accommodate SEN students in the mainstream classes through pre-service and in-service training. Most participants reported a lack of resources or facilities as a significant challenge. Teachers voiced that most schools do not have sufficient resources, such as classroom materials and appropriate school infrastructure which are necessary for students with special needs. As teachers confirmed, SEN students with physical disabilities cannot get accessibility to important places in almost all the schools. In many studies, lacking adequate resources is identified as a common barrier for inclusivity (Ainscow, 2004; Anwer & Sulman, 2012; Barco, 2007; Fazal, 2012; Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011; Kern, 2006; Mthembu, 2009; Spies, 2013; Walker, 2012). However, McGhie-Rihmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman and Lupart (2013) found that, for teachers who have an optimistic perception about their skills and who are confident in implementing inclusive education, resources become less of an issue. The study also indicates that lack of awareness among important stakeholders is a major challenge for inclusive practices. These important stakeholders include school management members, parents and normal students of the mainstream classes. Teachers mentioned that it was difficult to convince parents of SEN students that those children are worth special needs. Moreover, some parents of normal students do not agree to accommodate SEN students in the mainstream classes. In addition to these, awareness and general understanding of normal students are also considered as barriers for inclusivity. Teachers raised the issue that students with special needs are not being accepted by the regular students in the class. Thus, those SEN students are left out with low self-esteem. Consistent with the above finding, Fazal (2012) also found that awareness of parents is a hindrance for inclusive education. She described that non-cooperative behaviour of the parents of disabled children especially parents with low level of education is a challenge to teachers. "The attitude of the parents disturbs the children and makes them non-responsible" (Fazal, 2012, p.829). Broderick et al. (2012) agrees that teachers' attitudes and approaches towards inclusivity in the classroom can affect mainstream students' awareness to a great extent. Broderick and his colleagues state that to overcome the maltreatment of other students towards SEN students, teachers can incorporate teaching about diversity _ race, class, ethnicity, and ability. Teachers can make these elements an integral part of the curriculum so that a warm and supportive learning community can be established. Teachers of the study also expressed that they encounter curriculum-related difficulties when implementing inclusive practices. According to them, the compatibility and rigidity in following the curriculum, as well as creating a uniform assessment criteria are major barriers for inclusivity. Likewise, planning and preparations to cater for a variety of needs are also reported by many teachers as a hindrance to implanting such practices. "It would be very difficult for SEN students to grasp ideas with the mainstream students" stated a participant. Another added, "Special needs students cannot follow the curriculum due to their lack of intellectual power. They need a different approach, and according to their level the curriculum should be taught". It is because, "their thinking will be totally

different from a normal child", said another teacher. The above findings are in agreement with Jackson, Ryndak and Wehmeyer (2009) who asserted that for a single teacher, delivering multi-content curriculum simultaneously for a variety of learners is not practical in terms of human resources and time. It has to be remarked that all students in a classroom will not obtain the same level of knowledge or understanding for all learners learn differently and at different rates (Naicker, 2008). However, it can be possible with necessary support and individualised modification (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000). Time limitations is identified as a barrier by many teachers who participated in this study. According to them to cater for the diverse needs of the students, they need to spend a lot of time in planning and preparing for the lessons. Teachers emphasize that students need exposure to a wide variety of challenging task that would keep the students attentive and engaged throughout the lessons. Moreover, within the short time period, often curricular goals set for the lessons cannot be achieved. Kern (2006) stated that though teachers supported the concept of inclusion, they do not believe that they had sufficient time to prepare and implement inclusive activities in mainstream classes. Moreover, findings from the study by Walker (2012) also revealed that time constraints is a primary concern for teachers to adequately plan for SEN students in their mainstream classes.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the five basic recommendations arising from the findings of this study.

5.1 Recommendation 1

School leaders need to acquire knowledge about the philosophy and other aspects related to inclusive education. The current study indicated that school leaders or principals have a key role to play when trying inclusive practices. Thus, school leaders have to provide full support and backing to implement inclusive practices across all curricular and non-academic activities conducted in the school. As the technical and pedagogical support and assistance given to teachers are crucial, school leaders should ensure that teachers are provided with adequate pedagogical awareness and assistance that are related to special education.

5.2 Recommendation 2

The results of the study show that in terms of the physical aspects, schools do not have a safe environment to accommodate students with special needs. Hence, it is recommended that schools should be provided with facilities that enhance accessibility and flexibility for SEN students. It is recommended that schools should have materials needed to conduct differentiated learning activities in the classrooms. Likewise, SEN students should be accepted and treated fairly by all members of the school community.

5.3 Recommendation 3

The study also highlighted the importance of curriculum adaptation and integration to cater for the needs of SEN students in the mainstream classes. Hence, teachers need to set IEP goals for these students, and then carry out differentiated activities which are based on these IEPs.

Teachers also need to incorporate a variety of materials and activities to meet learners' needs. When teaching SEN students in inclusive settings, teachers need to modify their assessment strategies so that the diversity of needs are catered.

5.4 Recommendation 4

When providing for inclusivity, teachers need to offer individual support to SEN students who are studying in the mainstream classes. Providing individual student support include use of additional teaching, care and support to those students, additional teacher services (eg: assistant teachers), use of assistive materials, and school building or classroom adaptations. Teachers also need to collaborate with other stakeholders - students, parents, management members, community members — so that all students are truly integrated and supported.

5.5 Recommendation 5

The study indicates teachers do not have sufficient training in the field of special education. As a result, they require knowledge on disability types, understanding students' needs and pedagogic skills needed to teach SEN students. Hence, teachers need to improve and enrich their competencies to accommodate a wide range of diversity among learners in an inclusive classroom. The school leaders should provide in-service training opportunities to all teachers who are working in the mainstream classes. Similarly, pre-service teacher training can be strengthened by incorporating content and skills related to inclusive education.

6 CONCLUSION

Policies on inclusive education seem challenging as most of the school staff do not have the readiness needed for inclusive practices (Pasha, 2012). When schools are expected to incorporate inclusive education, it is uncertain whether teachers are ready to accept inclusivity in their classrooms. Thus, developing a better understanding of teacher and school readiness are crucial and it does not only benefit students, but may have a positive impact on the general school system. The aim of this study is to understand what teachers perceive about their schools' readiness for the implementation of inclusive education. The findings of the study show that, in general, teachers believe that schools are ready to embrace the concept of inclusivity in the schools of Hithadhoo, Addu Atoll. Generally, teachers in these schools have positive attitudes, and are aware of the concept of special education. The competencies they lack are pedagogical and technical support that could be improved through professional development programmes and other training sessions. The study shows that schools need to improve their physical environment in order to provide accessibility to all types of students. Despite these few areas, in general a positive ambience towards implementation of inclusivity is prevalent in all the schools. For teachers and other educators it is not easy to embrace inclusivity when they are not fully prepared and ready for the new paradigm. Hence, a number of recommendations for improving the existing scenarios in schools have been suggested.

7 REFERENCES

- [1] Agran, M., Alper, S., & Wehmeyer, M. (2002). Access to the general curriculum for students with significant disabilities: What it means to teachers. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 37(2), 123-133.
- [2] Ainscow, M. (2004). *The Next Step for Special Education*. Manchester: University of Manchester.
- [3] Ali, M. M., Mustapha, R., & Jelas, M. Z. (2006). An empirical study on teachers' perceptions towards inclusive education in Malaysia. *International Journal of Special Education*, 21(3), 36-44.
- [4] Allbritten, D., Mainzer, R., & Ziegler, D. (2004). Will students with disabilities be scapegoats for school failures? Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ684754.pdf> on 31st July 2014.
- [5] Alevriadou, A., & Lang, L. (2008). Active citizenship and contexts of special education. Retrieved from <http://cice.londonmet.ac.uk/fms/MRSite/Research/cice/pubs/guidelines/guidelines-12.pdf>.
- [6] Andrade, H. L. (2010). Students as the definitive source of formative assessment: Academic self-assessment and the self-regulation of learning. Retrieved on 31st August 2014, from http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=nera_2010.
- [7] Anwer, M., & Sulman, N. (2012). Regular schools' teachers' attitude towards inclusive education in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research Business*, 4 (5), 997-1015.
- [8] Avramidis, E., Bayliss, P., & Burden, R. (2000). Student teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the ordinary school. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16(1), 277-293.
- [9] Barco, M. J. (2007). The relationship between secondary general education teachers' self-efficacy and attitudes as they relate to teaching learning disabled students in the inclusive setting. Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
- [10] Barnes, B. (2011). Teachers' perceptions and understandings of diversity and inclusive education: A case study. Stellenbosch University: Faculty of Education.
- [11] Billingsley, B., McLeskey, J., & Crockett, J. B. (2014). Principal leadership: Moving toward inclusive and high-achieving schools for students with disabilities. Retrieved on 2nd October 2014, from <http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/tools/innovation-configurations>.
- [12] Broderick, A., Mehta-Parekh, H., & Reid, D. K. (2012). Differentiating instruction for disabled

- students in inclusive classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 44(3), 194-202.
- [13] Chireshe, R. (2011). Special needs education in-service teacher trainees' views on inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- [14] Cochran, H. K. (1998). Attitudes towards inclusive education. Differences in teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education as measured by the scale of teachers' attitudes toward inclusive classrooms (STATIC). Retrieved on 25th October 2014, from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED426548.pdf>.
- [15] Coulston, C., & Smith, K. (2013). School climate and inclusion. In Dary, T. & Pickeral, T.(ed) (2013). *School Climate Practices for Implementation and Sustainability*. A School Climate Practice Brief, Number 1, New York, NY: National School Climate Center.
- [16] Cummings, C., Dyson, A., & Millward, A. (2003). *Participation and democracy: What's inclusion got to do with it?* Netherland: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- [17] European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, (2011). *Participation in inclusive education – A framework for developing indicators*. Retrieved on 16th September 2014, from <https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/Participation-in-Inclusive-Education.pdf>.
- [18] Fazal, R. (2012). Readiness for inclusion in Pakistani schools: Perceptions of school administrators. *International Journal Social Science and Education*, 2(4), 825-832.
- [19] Fisher, D., Frey, N. & Thousand, J. (2003). What do special educators need to know and be prepared to do for inclusive schooling to work?. *Teacher Education and Special Education* 26(1), 42 – 50.
- [20] Geldenhuys, J. L., & Pieterse, G. (2005). Preparedness for inclusive education of South African educators in lower socio-economic schools. Retrieved 2nd October 2014, from http://www.isec2005.org.uk/isec/abstracts/papers_g/geldenhuys_j.shtml.
- [21] Hay, J. F., Smith, J., & Paulsen, M. (2001). Teacher preparedness for inclusive education. *South African Journal of Education*, 21(4), 213-218.
- [22] Hemmings, B., & Woodcock, S. (2011). Pre-service teachers' views of inclusive education: A content analysis. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 35 (2), 103-116.
- [23] Jackson, L.B., Ryndak, D.L., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2009). The dynamic relationship between context, curriculum, and student learning: A case for inclusive education as a research -based practice. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 4(1), 175-195.
- [24] Kapinga O. (2014). Teacher trainees' knowledge and preparedness for inclusive education in Tanzania: The case of Mkwawa University College of Education. Retrieved on 7th October 2014 from <http://www.tenmet.org/Droop/Docs/QEC%202014/Kapinga.pdf>.
- [25] Kern, E. (2006). Survey of teacher attitude regarding inclusive education within an urban school district. Retrieved on 2nd August 2014 from http://digitalcommons.pcom.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1069&context=psychology_dissertations on.
- [26] Khan, T. A. (2011). Investigation of secondary school teachers' attitudes towards and knowledge about inclusive education in Bangladesh. Canterbury: University of Canterbury.
- [27] Koga, N., & Hall, T. (2004). Curriculum modification. Retrieved 4th October 2014, from http://aim.cast.org/learn/historyarchive/backgroundpapers/curriculum_mod.
- [28] McGhie-Rihmond, D., Irvine, A., Loreman, T., Cizman, J. L., & Lupart, J. (2013). Teacher perspectives on inclusive education in rural Alberta, Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(1), 195 - 239.
- [29] Ministry of Education. (2010). *Inclusivity - Quality indicators child friendly Barabaru schools, Maldives*. Male': Author.
- [30] Ministry of Education. (2013) *Inclusive Education Policy*. Male': Author.
- [31] Mthembu, N. N., (2009). *Primary school educator's readiness for inclusive education*. Zululand: University of Zululand.
- [32] Naicker, J. (2008). *Educators' preparedness for inclusive education*. Zululand: University of Zululand.
- [33] Naseer, B. (2012). *Moving towards Inclusion: A case study of one urban school in the Maldives*. Canterbury: University of Canterbury.
- [34] NCSE. (2013). *Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools*, National Council for Special Education, Retrieved January 7th 2014, from http://www.ncse.ie/uploads/1/Supporting_14_05_13_web.pdf.
- [35] Nguyet, D. T., & Ha, L. T. (2010). Preparing teachers for inclusive education. Retrieved from http://www.crsprogramquality.org/storage/pubs/education/edhowto_vietnam2.pdf on 7th August 2014.
- [36] Pasha, S. (2012). Readiness of urban primary schools for inclusive education in Pakistan. *Journal of Research and Reflections in Education*, 6(2), 113-128.

- [37] Pivik, J., McComas, J., & Laflamme, M. (2002). Barriers and facilitators to inclusive education. *Exceptional Children*, 69(1), 97-107.
- [38] Reiser, R. (2008). *Implementing inclusive education: A Commonwealth guide to implementing Article 24 of the UN convention on the rights of people with disabilities*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat.
- [39] Ruairc, G.M., Ottesen, E., & Precey, R. (2013). *Leadership for inclusive education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- [40] Skidmore, D. (2004). *Inclusion: the dynamic of school development*. London: Open University Press.
- [41] Smith, D. S., & Tyler, N. C. (2011). Effective inclusive education: Equipping education professionals with necessary skills and knowledge. *Prospects*, 41, 323–339.
- [42] Spies, H. L. (2013). *Teachers' readiness to support children with Asperger's Syndrome within mainstream schools*. Stellenwdbosch: Stellenbosch University
- [43] Sucuoğlu, B., Bakkaloğlu, H., Karasu, F.I., Demir, S., & Akalın, S. (2013). Inclusive preschool teachers: Their attitudes and knowledge about inclusion. Retrieved August 16th 2014, from <http://www.int-jecse.net/article/view/5000016557/5000016363>
- [44] UN. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. Retrieved on 8th June 2014 from <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=259>.
- [45] UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- [46] UNESCO. (2001). *Understanding and responding to children's needs in inclusive classrooms. A guide for teachers*. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001243/124394e.pdf>.
- [47] UNESCO. (2013). *What is inclusive education*. Bangkok: UNESCO, Bangkok Office.
- [48] Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., Nevin, A., & Liston, A. (2005). Successful inclusive practices in middle and secondary schools. *American Secondary Education*, 33(3), 33-50.
- [49] UNICEF. (2012). *School readiness and transitions*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- [50] Walker, T. J. (2012). *Attitudes and inclusion: An examination of teachers' attitudes toward including students with disabilities*. Chicago: Loyola University.
- [51] Watson, N. (2012). *How can disability theory help our understanding of the lives of disabled children*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow.